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**Commission on the Status of Women**
**Forty-seventh session**
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Item 3 (c) (ii) of the provisional agenda*
**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: (ii) women's human rights and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly**

# Statement submitted by Empowering Widows in Development and National Women's Commission, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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One invisible category of women, vulnerable to violence across regions, cultures and religions, and across class, caste and age, are widows.

Yet the discourse on violence against widows has almost totally failed to recognize the wide spread, high incidence and gravity of this type of gender violence, perpetrated by family members and the community at large, and often condoned by the State.

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The Beijing Platform for Action makes no reference to widow-abuse and there has been a dearth of research on this hidden example of violence against women. In many cultures, it is common for widows of all ages (and many widows are very young) to be systematically physically, mentally and sexually abused through arcane traditional practices, as well as in the context of inheritance, land and property disputes.

Mourning and burial rites forced on widows in some cultures may be not only violently cruel and degrading but also life-threatening, especially in the context of the AIDS pandemic. In addition, widows, especially older widows, may be vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft, resulting in physical violence, leading to maiming and agonizing deaths. Witchcraft charges are often made in the context of AIDS bereavement. Widows, without male protectors, are often victims of rape, yet this very violence they have suffered is used as a tool to further dishonour them, exposing them to further stigma, leading to honour killings.

Women widowed through war and ethnic cleansing, across regions, face rape, sexual mutilation and torture, the deliberate infection of the AIDS virus, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy. The violence meted out to widows during armed conflict, as refugees and internally displaced persons, often continues long into the post-conflict period due to their poverty and vulnerability to economic and sexual exploitation, trafficking and prostitution, and the stigma of having been victims of sexual crimes.

In developed countries, "elder abuse" is an increasing feature of modern life, and the elderly victims of this type of violence are, in the main, elderly women who are widows.

This violence to widows is exacerbated due to their low status culturally and legally, to their destitution, powerlessness and lack of real access to the protections and remedies of an independent justice system.

Given the huge increases in the numbers of widows of all ages due to conflict, AIDS and the demographic tilt, it is imperative now that actions be recommended to address this hidden area of violence to women.

We invite the Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-seventh session to acknowledge this area of gender violence by formulating appropriate recommendations in the final documents. Also, we ask that the status of widows be prioritized as a further "emerging issue" for future sessions of the Commission.